

Did You Know?

Although Homer probably composed the *Odyssey* between 750 and 700 B.C., the epic is set during the Mycenaean period, which is a much earlier time in Greek history. Archaeological research has discovered that during the 400-year era from about 1600 B.C. to 1200 B.C., a remarkable civilization grew up around the city of Mycenae. This culture built massive palaces and forts. On a smaller scale, its skilled artisans created exquisitely decorated tools, including weapons and drinking vessels in bronze and silver. There was a form of writing.

But the Mycenaean culture came tumbling down swiftly and mysteriously. By about 1100 B.C., its palaces were in ruins, its artists were scattered, and the secret of its writing had been lost (it was rediscovered three thousand years later, after World War II). The brilliance of Greece entered a dark age from which it did not return until the age of Homer. In part 4, as in much of the *Odyssey*, Homer offers his audience glimpses of the government, social classes, customs, architecture, and values of Mycenaean culture, which he collected from the myths and legends that had been passed on orally from that time. To Homer's generations, his works were history, the only connection to the glorious past.



Gold funerary mask from Mycenae, c. 1600–1200 B.C.

Ruins of a grave circle in Mycenae, c. 1200 B.C.



Mycenaean gold cup, c. 1500 B.C.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

wily (wī' lē) *adj.* tricky or sly; crafty; p. 870

revelry (rev' əl rē) *n.* noisy festivity; merrymaking; p. 870

jostle (jos' əl) *v.* to bump, push, or shove roughly, as with elbows in a crowd; p. 870

implacable (im plək' ə bəl) *adj.* impossible to satisfy or soothe; unyielding; p. 872

deflect (di flekt') *v.* to cause to go off course; turn aside; p. 872

revulsion (ri vul' shən) *n.* intense dislike, disgust, or horror; p. 872

lavish (lav' ish) *v.* to give generously; provide in abundance; p. 877

aloof (ə lōōf') *adj.* emotionally distant; uninvolved; disinterested; standoffish; p. 878

tremulous (trem' yə ləs) *adj.* characterized by trembling; shaky; p. 879

Part 4

Death in the Great Hall

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest fighter of the islands leapt and stood on the broad door sill, his own bow in his hand. He poured out at his feet a rain of arrows from the quiver and spoke to the crowd:

5 “So much for that. Your clean-cut game is over. Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before, if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo.”

He drew to his fist the cruel head of an arrow for Antinous just as the young man leaned to lift his beautiful drinking cup, embossed,^o two-handled, golden: the cup was in his fingers: the wine was even at his lips: and did he dream of death? How could he? In that revelry amid his throng of friends who would imagine a single foe—though a strong foe indeed—could dare to bring death’s pain on him and darkness on his eyes? 15 Odysseus’ arrow hit him under the chin and punched up to the feathers^o through his throat.

Backward and down he went, letting the winecup fall from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted crimson runnels,^o a river of mortal red, 20 and one last kick upset his table knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood. Now as they craned to see their champion where he lay the suitors jostled in uproar down the hall, everyone on his feet. Wildly they turned and scanned the walls in the long room for arms; but not a shield, 25 the walls in the long room for arms; but not a shield, not a good ashen spear was there for a man to take and throw.^o All they could do was yell in outrage at Odysseus:

“Foul! to shoot at a man! That was your last shot!”

“Your own throat will be slit for this!”

Vocabulary

wily (wī’ lē) *adj.* tricky or sly; crafty

revelry (rev’ əl rē) *n.* noisy festivity; merrymaking

jostle (jɒs’ əl) *v.* to bump, push, or shove roughly, as with elbows in a crowd

10 **embossed:** decorated with designs that are slightly raised from the surface.

16 **punched up to the feathers:** The arrow goes clear through the throat so that only the arrow’s feathers remain visible in front.

19 **runnels:** streams.

24–26 **Wildly . . . throw:** Odysseus and Telemachus had removed all weapons and armor from the room on the previous night.

30

You killed the best on Ithaca."

"Our finest lad is down!

"Buzzards will tear your eyes out!"

35

For they imagined as they wished—that it was a wild shot,
an unintended killing—fools, not to comprehend
they were already in the grip of death.^o
But glaring under his brows Odysseus answered:

40

"You yellow dogs, you thought I'd never make it
home from the land of Troy. You took my house to plunder,
twisted my maids to serve your beds. You dared
bid for my wife while I was still alive.
Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide heaven,
contempt for what men say of you hereafter.
Your last hour has come. You die in blood."

45

As they all took this in, sickly green fear
pulled at their entrails, and their eyes flickered
looking for some hatch or hideaway from death.
Eurymachus alone could speak. He said:

50

"If you are Odysseus of Ithaca come back,
all that you say these men have done is true.
Rash actions, many here, more in the countryside.
But here he lies, the man who caused them all.

55

Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on^o
to do these things. He cared less for a marriage
than for the power Cronion^o has denied him
as king of Ithaca. For that
he tried to trap your son and would have killed him.

60

He is dead now and has his portion.^o Spare
your own people. As for ourselves, we'll make
restitution of wine and meat consumed,
and add, each one, a tithe^o of twenty oxen
with gifts of bronze and gold to warm your heart.
Meanwhile we cannot blame you for your anger."

Odysseus glowered under his black brows
and said:

65

"Not for the whole treasure of your fathers,
all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold

33–35 **For they . . . death:** The suitors still don't realize that their opponent is Odysseus, and that he has killed Antinous intentionally.

52 **whipped us on:** encouraged us; drove us.

54 **Cronion:** Zeus.

57 **his portion:** what he deserved; what fate had in store for him.

60 **tithe (tītḥ):** payment; tax.



put up by others, would I hold my hand.
There will be killing till the score is paid.
You forced yourselves upon this house. Fight your way out,
70 or run for it, if you think you'll escape death.
I doubt one man of you skins by."^o

They felt their knees fail, and their hearts—but heard
Eurymachus for the last time rallying them.

"Friends," he said, "the man is implacable.
75 Now that he's got his hands on bow and quiver
he'll shoot from the big door stone there
until he kills us to the last man.

Fight, I say,

let's remember the joy of it. Swords out!
80 Hold up your tables to deflect his arrows.
After me, everyone: rush him where he stands.
If we can budge him from the door, if we can pass
into the town, we'll call out men to chase him.
This fellow with his bow will shoot no more."

85 He drew his own sword as he spoke, a broadsword of fine bronze,
honed like a razor on either edge. Then crying hoarse and loud
he hurled himself at Odysseus. But the kingly man let fly
an arrow at that instant, and the quivering feathered butt^o
sprang to the nipple of his breast as the barb^o stuck in his liver.
90 The bright broadsword clanged down. He lurched and fell aside,
pitching across his table. His cup, his bread and meat,
were spilt and scattered far and wide, and his head slammed
on the ground.

Revulsion, anguish in his heart, with both feet kicking out,
he downed his chair, while the shrouding wave of mist^o closed
on his eyes.

95 Amphinomus^o now came running at Odysseus,
broadsword naked in his hand. He thought to make
the great soldier give way at the door.
But with a spear throw from behind Telemachus hit him
between the shoulders, and the lancehead drove

71 skins by: gets out alive.

88 butt: end.

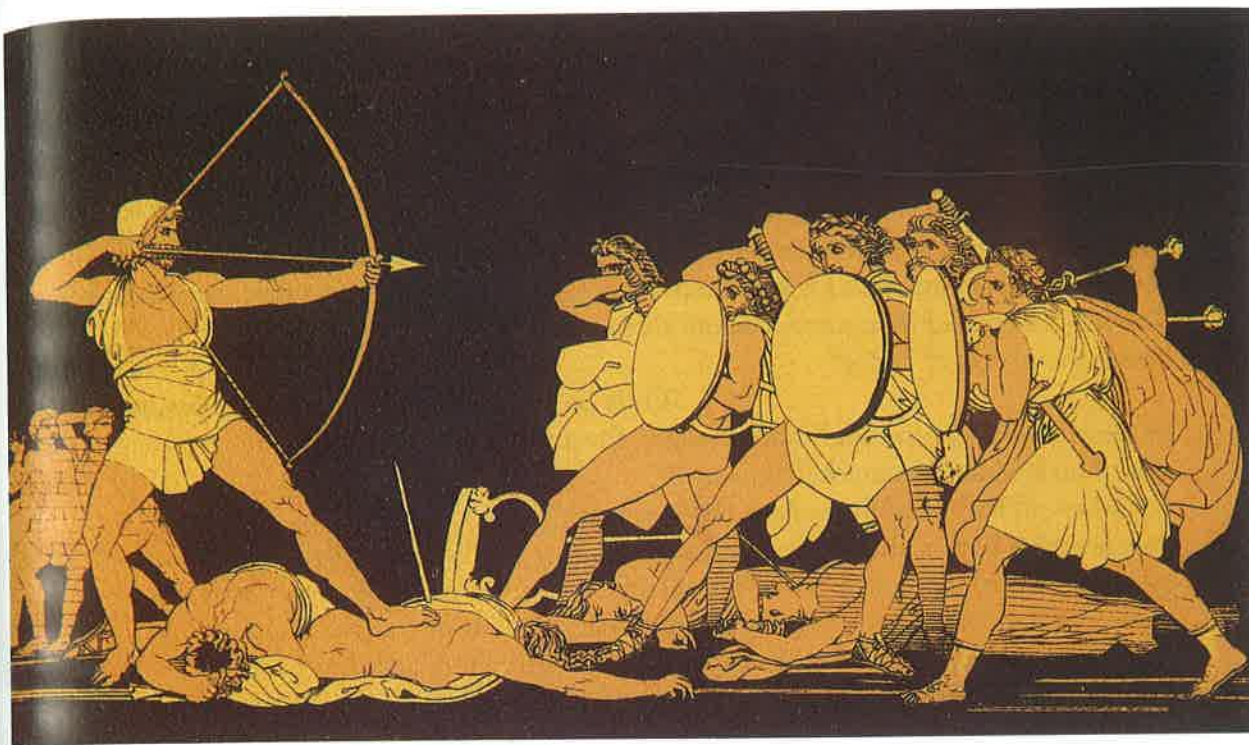
89 barb: arrowhead; point.

94 shrouding wave of mist: death.

95 Amphinomus (am fin' ə mäs)

Vocabulary

implacable (im plak' ə bəl) *adj.* impossible to satisfy or soothe; unyielding
deflect (di flekt') *v.* to cause to go off course; turn aside
revulsion (ri vul' shən) *n.* intense dislike, disgust, or horror



Odysseus Slaying the Suitors.

Viewing the art: What does this image suggest to you about Odysseus's standing among other men?

100 clear through his chest. He left his feet and fell
forward, thudding, forehead against the ground.
Telemachus swerved around him, leaving the long dark spear
planted in Amphinomus. If he paused to yank it out
someone might jump him from behind or cut him down with
a sword
105 at the moment he bent over. So he ran—ran from the tables
to his father's side and halted, panting, saying:

“Father let me bring you a shield and spear,
a pair of spears, a helmet.
I can arm on the run myself; I'll give
110 outfits to Eumaeus and this cowherd.
Better to have equipment.”

Said Odysseus:

“Run then, while I hold them off with arrows
as long as the arrows last. When all are gone
115 if I'm alone they can dislodge° me.”

115 dislodge: force back; kill.



Quick

upon his father's word Telemachus
ran to the room where spears and armor lay.
He caught up four light shields, four pairs of spears,
120 four helms of war high-plumed with flowing manes,^o
and ran back, loaded down, to his father's side.
He was the first to pull a helmet on
and slide his bare arm in a buckler strap.^o
The servants armed themselves, and all three took their stand
125 beside the master of battle.^o

While he had arrows
he aimed and shot, and every shot brought down
one of his huddling enemies.
But when all barbs had flown from the bowman's fist,
130 he leaned his bow in the bright entry way
beside the door, and armed: a four-ply shield
hard on his shoulder, and a crested helm,
horsetailed, nodding stormy upon his head,
then took his tough and bronze-shod spears.

Odysseus and Telemachus, along with their two allies, cut down all the suitors. Athena also makes an appearance, rallying their spirits and ensuring that none of her favorites is injured. Finally the great hall is quiet.

135 In blood and dust
he saw that crowd all fallen, many and many slain.

Think of a catch that fishermen haul in to a halfmoon bay
in a fine-meshed net from the whitecaps of the sea:
how all are poured out on the sand, in throes for^o the salt sea,
140 twitching their cold lives away in Helios' fiery air:
so lay the suitors heaped on one another.

The Trunk of the Olive Tree

Penelope's old nurse hurries upstairs to tell her mistress that Odysseus has returned and that all the suitors are dead. Penelope is amazed but refuses to admit that the stranger could be her husband. Instead, she believes that he must be a god.

The old nurse sighed:

"How queer, the way you talk!

120 **helms . . . manes:** war helmets decorated from front to back with a crest or ridge of long feathers resembling horses' manes.

123 **slide . . . strap:** The Greeks' small, round shield (**buckler**) had a strap in back through which the warrior slid his arm.

125 **master of battle:** Odysseus.

139 **in throes for:** in pain or struggle to return to.

Here he is, large as life, by his own fire,
 and you deny he ever will get home!
 Child, you always were mistrustful!
 5 But there is one sure mark that I can tell you:
 that scar left by the boar's tusk long ago.
 I recognized it when I bathed his feet
 and would have told you, but he stopped my mouth,
 10 forbade me, in his craftiness.

Come down,

I stake my life on it, he's here!
 Let me die in agony if I lie!"

Penelope said:

15 "Nurse dear, though you have your wits about you,
 still it is hard not to be taken in
 by the immortals. Let us join my son, though,
 and see the dead and that strange one who killed them."
 She turned then to descend the stair, her heart
 20 in tumult. Had she better keep her distance
 and question him, her husband? Should she run
 up to him, take his hands, kiss him now?^o
 Crossing the door sill she sat down at once
 in firelight, against the nearest wall,
 25 across the room from the lord Odysseus.

There

leaning against a pillar, sat the man
 and never lifted up his eyes, but only waited
 for what his wife would say when she had seen him.
 30 And she, for a long time, sat deathly still
 in wonderment—for sometimes as she gazed
 she found him—yes, clearly—like her husband,
 but sometimes blood and rags were all she saw.^o
 Telemachus' voice came to her ears:

35 "Mother,
 cruel mother, do you feel nothing,
 drawing yourself apart this way from Father?
 Will you not sit with him and talk and question him?
 What other woman could remain so cold?
 40 Who shuns her lord, and he come back to her
 from wars and wandering, after twenty years?
 Your heart is hard as flint and never changes!"

19–22 She turned . . . now: Penelope's thoughts reveal that she is not so uncertain of "that strange one" as she has let on.

33 blood . . . saw: Odysseus is again disguised as the old beggar.



Penelope answered:

- "I am stunned, child."
- 45 I cannot speak to him. I cannot question him.
I cannot keep my eyes upon his face.
If really he is Odysseus, truly home,
beyond all doubt we two shall know each other
better than you or anyone. There are
50 secret signs we know, we two."^o

A smile

came now to the lips of the patient hero, Odysseus,
who turned to Telemachus and said:

- "Peace: let your mother test me at her leisure.
55 Before long she will see and know me best.
These tatters, dirt—all that I'm caked with now—
make her look hard at me and doubt me still.
As to this massacre, we must see the end.
Whoever kills one citizen, you know,
60 and has no force of armed men at his back,
had better take himself abroad by night
and leave his kin. Well, we cut down the flower of Ithaca,
the mainstay of the town. Consider that."^o

Telemachus replied respectfully:

- 65 "Dear Father,
enough that you yourself study the danger,
foresighted in combat as you are,
they say you have no rival.

We three stand

- 70 ready to follow you and fight. I say
for what our strength avails,^o we have the courage."

And the great tactician,^o Odysseus, answered:

"Good.

- Here is our best maneuver, as I see it:
75 bathe, you three,^o and put fresh clothing on,
order the women to adorn themselves,
and let our admirable harper choose a tune
for dancing, some lighthearted air, and strum it.

50 *secret . . . two*: Eurynome has already said that she recognized Odysseus's scar; but Penelope is thinking of signs that are a secret strictly between her and Odysseus.

58–63 *As to . . . Consider that*: Odysseus warns that the "massacre" will have consequences, since the suitors were the most promising young men of Ithaca. (A ship's main mast is steadied by ropes called *mainstays*.) He suggests that he may be forced to flee at night—leaving his family again.

71 *avails*: is worth; helps.

72 *tactician*: one skilled in forming and carrying out (military) tactics or plans.

75 *you three*: Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius.

80 Anyone going by, or any neighbor,
will think it is a wedding feast he hears.
These deaths must not be cried about the town
till we can slip away to our own woods. We'll see
what weapon, then, Zeus puts into our hands."^o

85 They listened attentively, and did his bidding,
bathed and dressed afresh; and all the maids
adorned themselves. Then Phemius^o the harper
took his polished shell^o and plucked the strings,
moving the company to desire
90 for singing, for the sway and beat of dancing,
until they made the manor hall resound
with gaiety of men and grace of women.
Anyone passing on the road would say:

95 "Married at last, I see—the queen so many courted.
Sly, cattish wife! She would not keep—not she!—
the lord's estate until he came."

So travelers'

thoughts might run—but no one guessed the truth.
Greathearted Odysseus, home at last,
was being bathed now by Eurynome
100 and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again
in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena
lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him
taller, and massive, too, with crisping hair
in curls like petals of wild hyacinth
105 but all red-golden. Think of gold infused
on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art
Hephaestus^o taught him, or Athena:^o one
whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished
beauty over Odysseus' head and shoulders.
110 He sat then in the same chair by the pillar,
facing his silent wife, and said:

"Strange woman,

the immortals of Olympus made you hard,
harder than any. Who else in the world

74–83 Here . . . hands: Odysseus's plan is this: First, stall for time by making people think that Penelope's wedding feast is in progress. Then escape to the woods, and trust in Zeus.

86 Phemius (fē' mē əs)

87 polished shell: harp.



Youth Singing and Playing the Kithara, c. 490 B.C. Terra-cotta, height: 16½ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

107 Hephaestus (hi fes' təs): the god of fire and metalworking. Athena: in addition to all her other roles, she was the goddess of arts and crafts.

Vocabulary

lavish (lav' ish) *v.* to give generously; provide in abundance



115 would keep aloof as you do from her husband
if he returned to her from years of trouble,
cast on his own land in the twentieth year?°

Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.
Her heart is iron in her breast."

120

Penelope

spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

"Strange man,

if man you are . . . This is no pride on my part
nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely.

125 I know so well how you—how he—appeared
boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same . . .

Make up his bed for him, Eurycleia.°

Place it outside the bedchamber my lord
built with his own hands. Pile the big bed

130 with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen."°

With this she tried him to the breaking point,
and he turned on her in a flash raging:

"Woman, by heaven you've stung me now!
Who dared to move my bed?

135 No builder had the skill for that—unless
a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal
in his best days could budge it with a crowbar.

There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign,
built into that bed—my handiwork

140 and no one else's!

An old trunk of olive

grew like a pillar on the building plot,
and I laid out our bedroom round that tree,
lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof,

145 gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors.

Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,
hewed and shaped that stump from the roots up
into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve

112–117 *Strange . . . year*: Finally, after all his other battles have been won, Odysseus must win back his wife. Now he questions and criticizes her with uncharacteristic directness.

127 *Eurycleia* (yoo' ri klē' ə)

127–130 *Make up . . . linen*: Sounding sweetly hospitable, Penelope now tests the man who says he is her husband. She proposes that her maid move Odysseus's big bed out of the bedchamber and make it up.

Vocabulary

aloof (ə lōōf') *adj.* emotionally distant; uninvolved; disinterested; standoffish

as model for the rest. I planed them all,
 150 inlaid them all with silver, gold and ivory,
 and stretched a bed between—a pliant web
 of oxhide thongs dyed crimson.

There's our sign!

I know no more. Could someone else's hand
 155 have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?"^o

Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees
 grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.
 With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,
 throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him,
 160 murmuring:

"Do not rage at me, Odysseus!

No one ever matched your caution! Think
 what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us
 life together in our prime and flowering years,
 165 kept us from crossing into age together.
 Forgive me, don't be angry. I could not
 welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself
 long ago against the frauds of men,
 impostors who might come—and all those many
 170 whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . .
 But here and now, what sign could be so clear
 as this of our own bed?
 No other man has ever laid eyes on it—
 only my own slave, Actoris,^o that my father
 175 sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.
 You make my stiff heart know that I am yours."

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache
 of longing mounted, and he wept at last,
 his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,
 180 longed for

as the sunwarmed earth is longed for by a swimmer
 spent in rough water where his ship went down
 under Poseidon's blows, gale winds and tons of sea.
 Few men can keep alive through a big surf
 185 to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches

133–155 Woman, . . . away: The original bed could not be moved. One bed-post was a tree trunk rooted in the ground, a secret known only by Penelope, a servant, and Odysseus, who built the bed with his own hands. Furious and hurt, Odysseus thinks Penelope has allowed someone to saw the bed frame from the tree.

174 Actoris (ak tôr' is)

Vocabulary

tremulous (trem' yə ləs) *adj.* characterized by trembling; shaky



in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind:^o
and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,
her white arms round him pressed as though forever.

The next day, Odysseus is reunited with his father, Laertes, as news of the death of the suitors passes through town. Families go to Odysseus's manor to gather the bodies for burial. There, Antinous's father rallies the families to avenge the deaths of their sons and brothers. As battle begins, however, Athena appears and calls the island to peace.



181–186 a swimmer . . . behind:
Odysseus is compared to someone who swims to shore after a shipwreck. Coated with sea salt (clotted with brine), he rejoices that his wife is in his arms and his hellish experience (the abyss) is over.



Odysseus Returns to Penelope. Isaac Taylor. Engraving. Private collection.

Viewing the art: What can you tell about the relationship between Penelope and Odysseus? How does this engraving enhance your understanding?

Responding to Literature

Personal Response

How did you respond to the way in which Odysseus dealt with the suitors?

ANALYZING PART 4

RECALL

1. Describe the death of Antinous.
2. How does Eurymachus attempt to avert bloodshed? How does Odysseus respond?
3. What role does Telemachus play in the fight against the suitors?
4. What evidence do the nurse and Telemachus provide to convince Penelope that the stranger is Odysseus? How does she respond?
5. In the end, what convinces Penelope that her husband has returned?

INTERPRET

6. In your opinion, why does Odysseus choose Antinous as his first victim? Why do the suitors react to Antinous's death as they do?
7. Review Eurymachus's speech on page 871, lines 48–62. Why might he have thought that these words could persuade Odysseus to choose another course of action? Why does Odysseus refuse to give in?
8. How does Telemachus prove that he can think and act like his father?
9. Penelope faces this dilemma after the suitors are killed: "Had she better keep her distance / and question him, her husband? Should she run / up to him, take his hands, kiss him now?" What are her choices? Why might she be unclear about what to do?
10. Explain why Penelope's test of Odysseus's identity brings him "to the breaking point." Of all his challenges, why might this be the toughest?

EVALUATE AND CONNECT

11. Do you believe that Odysseus's desire for revenge is common in society today? Explain.
12. Reread your response to the Focus Activity on page 809. How does your experience, or that of your acquaintance, compare with that of Odysseus?
13. Give one or more reasons why the **epic simile** on pages 879–880, lines 177–188, is particularly appropriate.
14. From the way he describes Penelope, would you say that Homer's attitude toward women seems old-fashioned or modern? Explain.
15. What is your response to the ending of part 4? Are happy endings ever true-to-life? Explain.

Literary ELEMENTS

Climax

In a story or epic narrative, the **climax** is the moment when the events of the plot reach an emotional high point and the action takes a new turn. Very often this is also the moment of greatest interest or excitement for the reader. In a long work such as the *Odyssey*, there may be more than one climax. Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus, for example, is a self-contained tale within the epic—and the moment when Odysseus blinds the Cyclops is its climax.

1. What is the climax of "Death in the Great Hall"? What is the climax of "The Trunk of the Olive Tree"?
2. Which of these climaxes could be considered the climax of the epic as a whole? Explain your answer.

● See **Literary Terms Handbook**, p. R3.